9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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CHAPTER XIV

WOOD, SKIN, STRAW AND RUSH WORK.

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322 Many old-fashioned tools will be found lying around an old farmstead, some of them still used and others discarded but hoarded as is the way of the countryman. With some of these, generally dismissed in farm auction bills as "other objects too numerous to mention," we shall deal briefly in this chapter. Upright butter churns of oak are to be found in every county: they are made by the cooper and their construction is a specialized craft. I illustrate (Fig. 67) some varieties of churn and staff ("dasher" or "lonny"). They differ in size because the churns are "made to measure" according to the number of milking cows kept. One of the drawings shows the dash churn in cross-section: it should be added that the joins between the staves of the bottom are sealed with rushes. Ancient churns discovered in the bogs are generally cut out of the solid. They have a narrow neck and are provided with lugs for transport. Old accounts tell us that the dairymaid used to plunge in her arm to make the butter, and thus the dasher may be regarded as an implement developed directly from the human arm and hand. The staff was often worked by an arrangement of levers known as "glaiks," but this is rarely seen nowadays.

The full equipment of stave-built vessels supplied by the cooper included, besides the churn, the buttermilk butt and the cream butt or "keeler," the butter tub, the milk "can," into which the fresh milk was poured, and the piggin. Many

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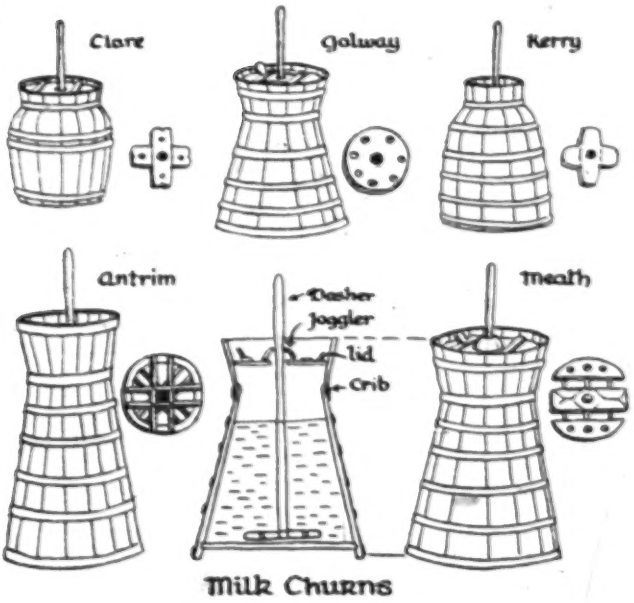

Milk Churns

Fig. 67.

Fig. 68.

[415]

of these are in regular use: I illustrate a piggin or milking vessel (Fig. 68), a butter tub, and an old-fashioned tub of bog-fir, bound, as were the other stave-vessels before the adoption of iron hoops, with split sally rods, and covered with a stone lid. Two smaller stave-built noggins for holding water, milk or porridge are also shown (Fig. 69), the Tyrone example being of oak with an ash wrapping, the Donegal specimen of bog-fir and sally bands. Passing mention must be made of wooden spoons and the handsomely carved butter stamps (Fig. 70). Wooden dishes, ladles (Fig. 70) skimmers and jogglers (Fig. 67) are made of sycamore and turned on the pole-lathe.

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Sieves of various kinds found a use in the dairy as well as in kitchen and barn. Among the exports from Ireland in

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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former centuries animal hides and skins figured prominently, and it is not uncommon in the west to see cured skins of wild and domestic animals used as floor-coverings. No doubt in earlier days skins and furs were worn, but in modern times raw-hide has been employed only for shoes such as the "pampooties" worn by the Aran Islanders. These have the advantage that they do not damage the frail curraghs, just as the Islandman's headgear is the knitted Tam o' Shanter which the wind cannot blow off. A century ago one might have seen a dried sheep-skin serving as a window, or even a cowhide used as a door-hanging. Sheep- and goat-skins still find their uses as back-protectors (Chapter 16), in the making

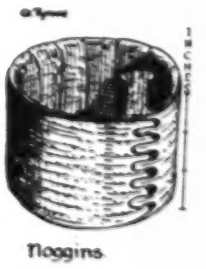

Fig. 69.

of thongs for flails, and especially in providing bottoms for various trays and sieves, the only difference between them being that the sieve-skin is perforated.

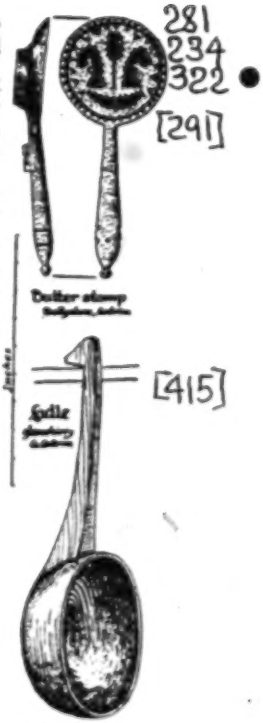

Fig. 70.

The skin, scraped and dried, is wrapped or sewn on to a rim of ash or bog-fir (Fig. 71), and a good deal of skill is required to stretch it on without a wrinkle. These trays are called wights or wechts in the north-east: the peat wight is for carrying turf to the house and the corn wight for pouring corn into a sack. The winnowing tray sometimes has small perforations to allow the wind to pass through as the corn is shaken on to a cloth. A windy spot was selected for the purpose, and numerous "Shelling Hills" get their name from this operation. The perforations, about one-eighth of an inch

:3:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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323 until these very last times, although a great number of English
415 potters have set up their trade'.[1] No tradition of hand-made pottery survived in Ireland as it did in the Barvas ware of Lewis in the Hebrides. On the other hand another ancient craft
415 of prehistoric origins persisted into living memory in the making of wooden noggins in which milk and porridge were taken. They
322 are small stave-built vessels of oak, having one stave projecting

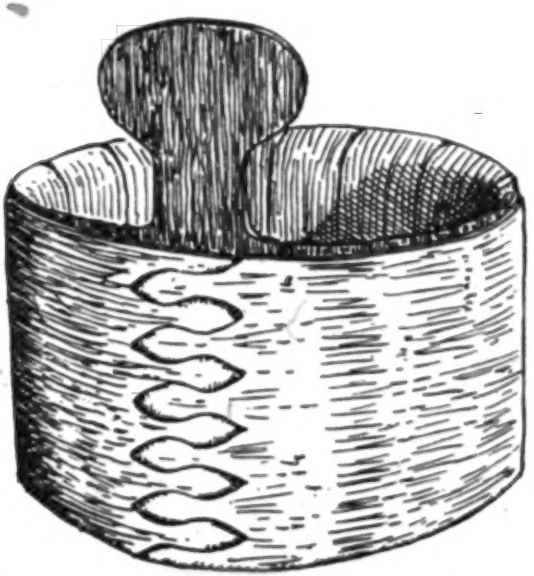

FIG. 22. Wooden noggin, Co. Down. Height of rim, 3 in.

to serve as a handle. The staves are held together and the single-piece base kept in place by a thin band of ash joined by interlocking tongues (Fig. 22). This method of fastening the
[171] wooden band is found on the similar 'piggins' of parts of Britain, also in Scandinavia and throughout the Asiatic Arctic region, and it may well derive in these islands from an ancient circumpolar culture. The noggins were made by skilled craftsmen who

[1]Gerard Boate, *Ireland's Natural History* (1652), 159.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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were known as noggin weavers. Cheap delph has now taken the place of the noggin, but the word survives in a phrase I have heard applied to a child who is thriving on his food: 'he wants a stave out of his noggin'.

The art of pot-making declined and in many parts of the country almost disappeared after the late Bronze Age, when bronze cauldrons came in to provide serviceable cooking-vessels. Some archaeologists have related this decline to the climatic deterioration of the late Bronze Age, but it is more reasonable to associate it with an increase of pastoral pursuits and a diet of whitemeats. The bronze cauldrons were highly prized: from Gaelic literature we know that they were the special property of the head of the house and they seem to have taken on something of the magic of the early pots. They were sometimes credited with strange virtues such as the ability to yield to each guest the piece of flesh to which his rank or occupation entitled him, and they occupy a prominent place in folk-lore and legend.

It is interesting to notice that the bulk of the earliest prehistoric pots in Ireland are of plain brown burnished earthenware, faithful copies of the leather prototypes proper to a pastoral people. This western European Neolithic pottery is one of the indications of a common substratum in the early civilizations of Atlantic Europe. The round-bottomed vessels simulated round-bellied leather containers, which may well have continued to be used for cooking into historic times. We know that whole cow-hides were employed for the purpose in Elizabethan times. This is undoubtedly a survival of older custom: we find it among hunting peoples, for example the Indians of Labrador are in the habit of preparing broth in a vessel made from the belly of a caribou. A relic of the substitution of pots for skins may perhaps be seen in the persistent Irish belief that the money obtained from the sale of a cow-hide should be used for the purchase of a metal vessel. The Scots, as Froissart and Burt tell us, cooked their beef in skins stretched on four stakes. Fynes Moryson says of the Irish: 'Flesh they seethe in a hollow tree lapped in a raw cow's hide, and so set over the fire.'[1] From prehistoric times we have many ancient

[1]Fynes Moryson, *The Description of Ireland*, 228.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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VII

FURNITURE AND FITTINGS

GOOD craftsmanship in wood is so rarely seen in the Irish peasant house that one easily notices a piece of quality furniture. The chances are that it has come out of 'the big house' or, near the coast, from a wrecked ship. Very little oak furniture has survived from the days before the famine, and what there is is likely to be of bog-oak, that is timber dug out of the bogs. The truth seems to be that by the time improved styles of furniture and settled conditions of life had come about, in the second half of the seventeenth century, the native oak-woods had been almost everywhere destroyed, and the common furniture came to be made of bog wood or imported soft woods. The gentry favoured mahogany. Already in the early seventeenth century Ireland was importing pine wood from western Scotland,[1] and during the eighteenth century it was the returning timber ships from Newfoundland and Nova Scotia that initiated Southern Irish emigration to the New World.

No doubt this lack of good quality peasant furniture may be partly attributed to poverty, and to the recurrent famines, of fuel as well as food, which brought despair and led to the burning of furniture. But it also reflects the weak tradition of built-up furniture among a people predominantly pastoral and to some extent nomadic. Certainly degrading poverty and insecure tenancies did not provide the means of support for skilled craftsmen: yet in Wales, where conditions under an

[1] H. G. Graham, *The Social Life of Scotland in the 18th Century*, 4th ed. (1937), 196. On bog timber see A. T. Lucas in *Béaloideas*, 33, 71–134.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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often oppressive landlordism were not dissimilar, a strong tradition of good quality oak furniture was standardized in the eighteenth century and has remained a source of inspiration and pride ever since. The destruction of the native oak woods and the stronger pastoral strain in Ireland were perhaps the dominant factors, but once more we note the exceptional position of the barony of Bargy and Forth, where Gabriel Beranger commented in 1780 on the good-quality, well-kept furniture: 'I have seen in these cabins bureaus of oak so clean that they shone like polished mahogany.'[1]

Sturdiness rather than elegance was the characteristic feature of Irish peasant furniture, and many small household and dairy fittings were hand-cut from the solid or lathe-turned. Yet there was no lack of care taken in the proper arrangement of the furniture in the house. Its disposition was fixed by long custom and varied little throughout the country. One is reminded of the careful division of the limited floor-space of the nomads' tent among the Lapps or Mongols. In fact only by adhering to a strict formula could the family and all their belongings be fitted into a single room which was traditionally also a byre. Invariably the centre of the room, and the whole space in front of the fire, was kept open. This was, for the bulk of the peasant population down to the eighteenth century, the family sleeping-place. According to an account of Mayo in 1799, they slept naked with their feet to the fire, lying on rushes, with a covering of blankets or day-clothes.[2] An earlier account of the Rosses of Donegal, relating to the middle of the eighteenth century, gives us more details: 'All the family lay together in one bed, and, if any visitors came in the evening, they too slept with them; for they set no bounds to their hospitality . . . heath or bent bushes were spread across the floor, to a length sufficient for the number present, and in breadth about six feet; over this litter, the mistress of the house laid part of a long plaid or blanket, on which the others, having stripped off their clothes, lay down as fast as they could; men and women together, all naked: then the mistress having drawn the rest of the blanket over them, lay down herself, naked also. This they call a

[1] Lady Wilde, 'Memoir of Gabriel Beranger', *J.R.S.A.I.* (1876), 132.
[2] In C. Otway, *Sketches in Erris and Tyrawly* (1841), 28, 32.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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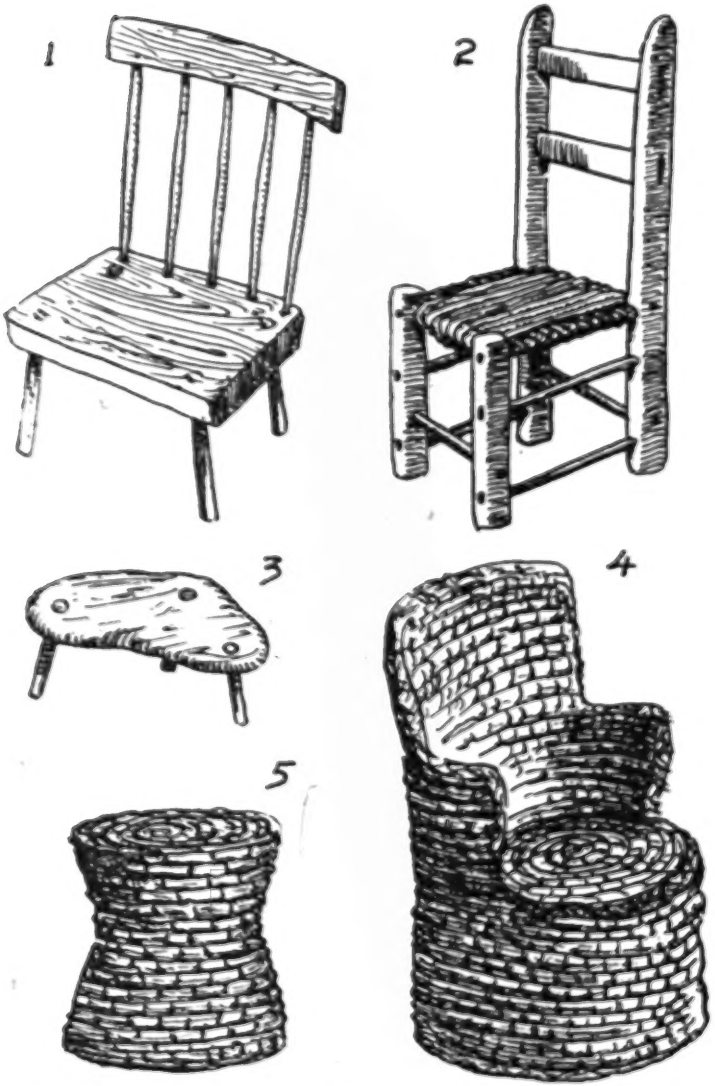

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FIG. 29. (1) Co. Antrim chair. (2) Co. Down straw-seated chair. (3) Creepie. (4) Armchair of coiled straw-rope, Co. Cork. (5) Straw seat, Co. Clare.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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native to the country. Around the coasts the sycamore is almost the only tree that persists, for it will stand up to the salt-laden gales everywhere save on the most exposed parts of the west coast. R. U. Sayce has recorded the belief, from Montgomeryshire, that 'sycamore trees keep the fairies away and stop them spoiling the milk',[1] but this bit of lore cannot be of any great antiquity since the tree did not reach Britain from its home in the mountain belt of southern Europe until the sixteenth century. It presumably arose from the association of the tree with the farmyard. In Ireland the sycamore probably came in with the early seventeenth century planters, though the beech may be a medieval or even older introduction. Both trees had many economic uses, especially for dry-coopering, that is the manufacture of provision casks and butter firkins, and the sycamore is an excellent wood for turnery. Later, as the linen industry became mechanized, the beetling mills demanded sycamore for the great beam of the engine and beech for the vertical beetles.

The lay-out of farm buildings seems to have been, in the native single-farms, as haphazard and formless as was that of the houses themselves in an old clachan. As separate farms with outbuildings ('offices') became fashionable improvements after the middle of the eighteenth century, the latter were built for convenience of access and they were put close to the farmhouse, either attached to one end or lying parallel to provide a windbreak. Only in the planted areas does one find old examples of planned 'courtyard farms' where the house and offices enclose a square or rectangular yard. I fancy the stone or wooden 'hovel-stands' with their picturesque mushroom-like staddle-stones are also confined to planted districts. In the west a favourite method of making stacks is to build them about a central pole. (See p. 164.)

The wayside style is another absentee in the native Irish countryside, as is the footpath which is its companion. Short-cuts are rarely worth while in a land of tiny fields, and if there is a right of way there is sure to be a tolerable road. In fact there are so many farm lanes and access ways to mountain, seashore or bog that an economist might regard the amount of land so taken out of cultivation as excessive. It has been

[1] R. U. Sayce, *Montgomeryshire Collections*, 45 (1938).

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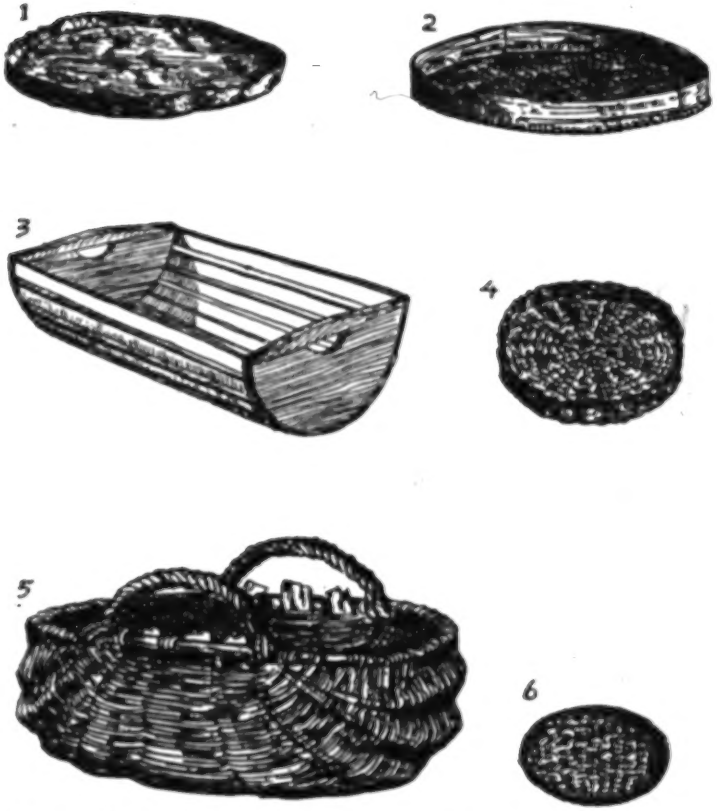

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FIG. 71. Skin-tray, split-ash riddle and potato baskets. Approximate scale 1/9 (No. 5, 1/6). (1) Sheep-skin tray or wight. (2) Split-ash riddle. (3) Potato 'basket'. (4) Potato skib. (5) Potato basket. (6) Potato skib. (All Co. Antrim.)

Irish wren boys

[534] carried a skin tambourine which they beat when hunting the wren on St. Stephen's Day, and one wonders whether the drummers from whom the Orange performers on King William's Day inherit their wild rhythms were trained on ceremonial wights. (There are also sieves, riddles and shallow baskets of split ash or sally, but these, for example the flat round potato skib—a communal self-service plate—should properly be classed as the work of specialists. 212 (Fig. 71).

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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trade in 1825.[1] Formerly it was at the fair that country folk purchased the specialized goods that could not be home-produced—edged tools, vessels of wood and metal, pieces of delph, and such colourful trivialities as beads and ribbons. The pole-lathe on which wooden vessels for the dairy were turned was known in early Christian times if not before, and a few examples are still in use. It seems probable that the turners once utilized a living branch as a spring-pole, like the bodgers of the Chilterns. At any rate we read of Co. Meath, early last century, that 'turners and wooden dish-makers generally build a hut in a wood that is being cut, and reside there while the timber is felling, buying and working those kind of trees most suited to their purpose and paying for them as the manufactured goods are sold'.[2] Today the turner selects and fells his own trees, preferably sycamore, and works them up in his own yard.

The churn-maker also had his stand at the fair, and there were the noggin-weavers and sieve-makers, the carvers of ladles, wooden spoons and butter prints (Fig. 83), and the makers of baskets and creels. Here also forgathered the beggars and ballad-singers, fiddlers, pedlars, gamesters, and the trouble-makers and the match-makers. It was a recognized practice for a bachelor to be on the look-out for a mate, or for a match-maker if things had gone far enough, and for the men of one parish to seek to settle old scores with enemies from another parish. There is some evidence that trial marriage contracts, binding for a year, were at one time an accompaniment of the fairs. Like the Scottish hand-fasting, the system allowed the husband to test the usefulness and fertility of the wife. Nor should we forget the games and horse-racing, and into the nineteenth century the cock-fighting and bull-baiting, which have long been associated with the great fairs.

Down to fairly recent times all the fairs were held on saints' days or at the movable feasts of Easter and Whitsun, and if the saint was a local one the fair, as at Kilorglin, was also a pattern, that is a festival associated with the patron saint. Unless the church has been able to keep a firm hold on the proceedings, these patterns have degenerated until many of

[1] See also De Latocnaye, *A Frenchman's Walk through Ireland, 1796–97*, 250.
[2] R. Thompson, *Statistical Survey of the County of Meath*, 255.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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them have had to be suppressed: they became occasions of lawlessness and bloodshed. Like the fairs they drew their adherents from several rival neighbourhoods and therefore brought feuding clans together. The following is a typical comment of the early nineteenth century: 'On these patron days, which

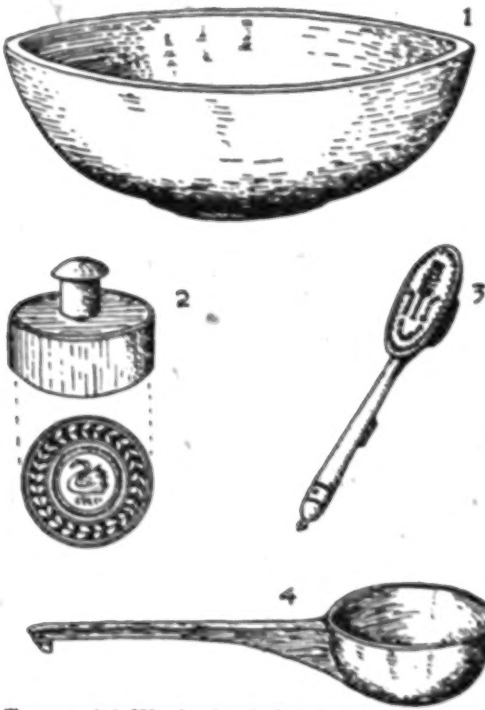

FIG. 83. Turnery. (1) Wooden bowl, Co. Armagh. (2) Butter stamp, Co Fermanagh. (3) Butter stamp, Co. Antrim. (4) Ladle, Co. Antrim.

generally fall out on Sundays, great numbers of young persons of both sexes assemble, tents are erected, music, dancing, drinking and every kind of excess takes place, and the revel not infrequently terminates in battery and bloodshed, from the contention of adverse factions'.[1] Sir William Wilde's description

[1] W. Shaw Mason, *Parochial Survey*, 3, 245 (of Listerling, Co. Kilkenny).

16:Messenger E-4.5 (1955-1966) 1969 ER6 Rural Irish ER6
(1959-1960) Inis Beag

underclothing retained. The latter practice reflects extreme modesty as well as the need for warmth. Islanders have an obsessive fear of nakedness which permits them, after infancy, to bathe only their feet, hands, and face and precludes bathing in the sea and the use of bathtubs.

Crafts

Of the several crafts practiced in Inis Beag, only three are strictly income instead of combined subsistence-income activities: the manufacture of *curach* by four men, the mass production of stockings by four girls in the factory at the coast guard station, and the fashioning of miniature canoes by a single man. Sweaters, woven belts, cowhide shoes, and the small multi-colored shawls are made both for local wear and for export. Most of the exported sweaters are sold to a particular mainland firm for resale, as are all of the model canoes, and the factory is sponsored by Gaeltacht Eireann which markets the stockings produced. Other craft commodities are sold by the folk directly to consumers, most of whom are tourists.

The long rowing canoe of Inis Beag is distributed widely along the west coast of Ireland, from Cos. Donegal to Kerry, and its seaworthy qualities as well as the rowing skill of the crews which sail it are renowned. One of a number of varieties of the coracle, which has a heritage extending back to the Mesolithic, it is built of deal and oak lathes and covered with tarred canvas (see Fig 10). Before canvas was introduced, untanned seal, cow, and horse hides were used for covering, and these were reported from a nearby island less than 100 years ago. The *curach* is approximately 20 feet in length, has a high pointed nose, is round bellied and lacks a keel, draws less than 6 inches of water, and is rowed with narrow 10-feet-long oars. These oars are bladeless for use in rough seas and are pivoted on single tholepins rather than in oarlocks. The looms of the oars overlap, so that oarsmen must pull cross-handed, and on long journeys a lug sail is hoisted to relieve the crew. For the neophyte, rowing a *curach* cross-handed in a heavy sea can be even more abusive of the hands than rebuilding a gateway in a stone fence. Most canoes hold three men—are "three-oared"—but two-, four-, and even five-men *curach* were or are used. Loads up to a ton and a half can be accommodated, and trussed asses, sheep, and horses sometimes are transported in them.

Forty-two householders in Inis Beag own three-men canoes, among whom three have additional two-oared *curach*. The craft are stored upside down in "cots" on either side of the strand along the margins of the common land, although Terrace villagers use a small beach along the northeast coast of the island; they are carried between the cots and the water upside down on the shoulders of the crew, and in that position resemble gigantic beetles. Two Inis Beag men are at work building canoes most of the time, and when they are not busy at this task they construct furniture for local sale. Two other men manufacture *curach* occasionally, and another two who once built them have discontinued the practice. No canoe makers are found elsewhere in the region; therefore, Inis Beag artisans serve the

16:Messenger E-4,5 (1955-1966) 1969 ER6 Rural Irish ER6
(1959-1960) Inis Beag

at breakfast and lamb, if available, at supper, and the family goes out only to attend mass. Many homes are decorated then for the 12 days, with cards received and sprigs of holly placed on windowsills and fireplace mantels and crepe paper and balloons hung from the ceiling. More visiting among relatives is done between St. Stephen's Day and Epiphany than at any other time of the year, and guests are treated to cakes and drinks, which include liquor.

Whereas the folk during the Christmas season are the most optimistic and expansive, they are the least so for the three or more days following the death of one of their number. Work halts until after the burial of the deceased—"out of respect for the body"—and subdued talk focuses on death and salvation and the tribulations of life on earth. It is at this time that the masochism of the islanders is most in evidence, and they are most prone to discuss the teachings of the church, to reveal doubts concerning the afterworld, and to bemoan their own sinful lives. In evaluating the career of the person who has just died, an attempt is made to explain the cause of his demise, and both natural and supernatural causes are considered. Most deaths are attributed to the natural causes of old age, illness, and accident; but death also can come as the result of God's will and the actions of the Devil and malignant pagan forces, such as witches of the evil eye and ghosts. The immediate mourning for one who dies before the age of 40 years is deep and prolonged, particularly if small children are left with only a single parent, and it is believed that "the good die young." One of the most disliked traditions in Inis Beag is that of formal mourning for a year, during which time social activities for close relatives of the deceased are curtailed severely; they cannot attend parties, sing, dance, or play music in their homes, and men must reduce in number their visits to the pubs. Life is so dull as a matter of course, so the complaint is, that placing restrictions on what few social activities are available makes it almost unbearable.

When a person dies, his body is "waked" in the house until taken in procession to the church during the late afternoon of the day following death. Another procession escorts the coffin to the cemetery early the next morning, after it has stood the night unattended near the altar. How many folk attend the wake and compose the two processions depends on the number of the dead person's kin, his prestige status, and how well he was liked. The "laying out" of the corpse for the wake is done by close female relatives of the deceased; they wash the body and powder its face, put on the clothes or habit, and prepare the bed on which the corpse will rest. A man may be attired in new white bawneens and *crios* and a woman in her wedding dress, but it is becoming more common today for the body to be clothed in a purchased brown habit. On the breast the hands are crossed and rosary beads entwined in the fingers, and the corpse is covered up to the chest with a white sheet which later is used to wrap it up in the coffin. The manufacture of the coffin usually is assigned to one of the canoe and furniture makers, who assembles it crudely with unpainted boards and delivers it the night of the wake or the following morning.

The wake now is a solemn occasion in most of Ireland, and is attended for the purpose of praying for the soul of the dead and sympathizing with the relatives of the deceased. But until recently it was a gay affair, merrier than a wedding,